

Name: _____

George Frideric Handel

*Handel understands effect better than any of us –
when he chooses, he strikes like a thunderbolt.*

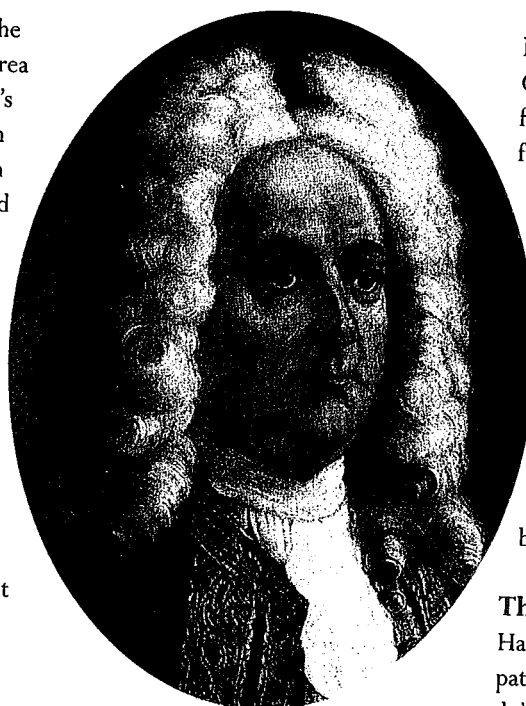
WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART (1756–91)

* Please
annotate

Handel and Bach were born in the same year, in much the same area of central Germany – Halle, Handel's birthplace in Saxony, is about 160km (100 miles) north of Thuringia. Both men lived to a reasonable old age, and both had lost their sight when they died. But their respective careers could not have been more different.

Early years

While Bach was content to live and work within the musical tradition of his family, Handel had to struggle to make a career in music. His father wanted his son to study law, and tried to stifle the boy's interest in music. But Handel persisted, and was eventually allowed to study music as part of his general education. Only after his father's death did he take it up full-time and in 1703, aged 18, he set out for Hamburg in search of employment.



ABOVE: George Frideric Handel (1685–1759). He never appeared in public without his voluminous wig.

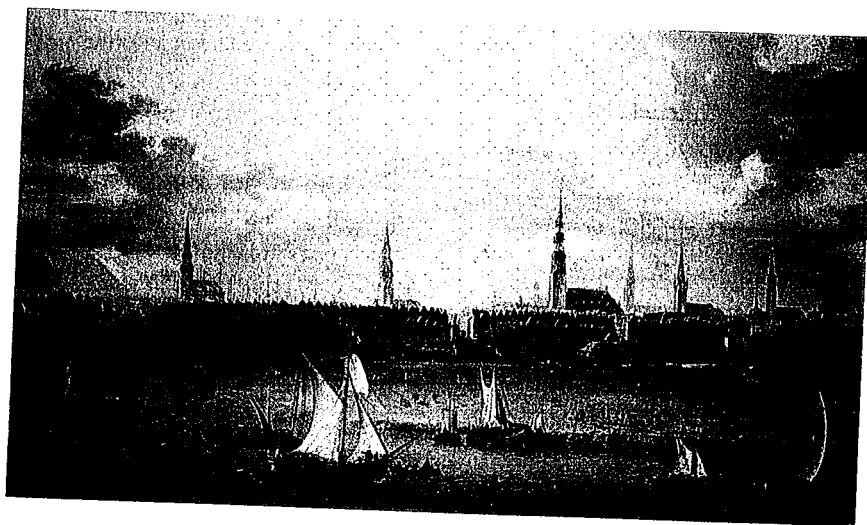
Hamburg

One of Hamburg's attractions was a flourishing centre of opera. Germany's first commercial opera house had opened there in 1678, and had scraped along financially under a succession of entrepreneurial directors with flair but no money. Here Handel found an ideal proving-ground for his early attempts at the genre which would dominate his life. But he declined the offer of a permanent post, and instead departed for Italy – the birthplace of opera.

The Italian experience

Handel travelled to Italy under the patronage of Prince Ferdinando de' Medici, and in 1707 his first mature opera, *Rodrigo*, was produced at a Florentine theatre. It was a success, earning Handel the favours of the grand duke's mistress, the singer Vittoria Tarquini. Perhaps wisely, Handel quickly departed for Rome, where he found employment at the court of Cardinal Pietro Ottoboni, the immensely wealthy papal vice-chancellor. There he met celebrated musicians including Corelli and the Scarlattis, and tried his hand at music for the unfamiliar Catholic liturgy, including a setting of the Vespers. His first oratorio, a setting of the Resurrection story, was performed with great splendour on Easter Sunday 1708 at the Palazzo Bonelli.

From Rome Handel travelled on to Naples and then to Venice, where his opera *Agrippina* was performed during



ABOVE: An anonymous painting of Hamburg, one of the most important of the Hanseatic ports, in 1700.



THE SQUARE IN FRONT OF ST PETER'S BASILICA IN ROME, PAINTED IN 1710 BY G. P. PANNINI.



ABOVE: A romantic impression depicting Handel making music at the keyboard with his friends.

1710 carnival season. Then, ever eager for new experiences, he returned north to Hanover, to be appointed *Kapellmeister* to the elector at a good salary and with the promise of a year's sabbatical leave. He took it immediately, and promptly left with an invitation to London. His transformation from a German to an English composer had begun.

England

In Queen Anne's England, Handel stepped into a musical vacuum left by the deaths of John Blow and his gifted pupil Henry Purcell. He decided to fill it by satisfying the growing middle-class demand for opera. His opera *Rinaldo* scored a huge success at the Queen's Theatre in London, both musically and dramatically. Audiences were particularly intrigued by a dramatic masterstroke – the release of a flock of sparrows onstage to lend verisimilitude to the aria "Augelletti" ("Little Birds"). But Handel was under an obligation to return to Hanover, where he spent some 15 months

perfecting his instrumental compositions – overtures and *concerti grossi*.

In the autumn of 1712 Handel obtained another period of leave from the indulgent Elector of Hanover, and

returned to London, where his next opera, *Il pastor fido* (*The Faithful Shepherd*), was put on at the Haymarket Theatre. This time the public was disappointed. As one critic put it: "The habits [costumes] were old. The opera short." Handel immediately hit back with a full-length, five-act opera, based on the Greek myth of Theseus. At the same time he began to fulfil royal commissions, supplying royal odes and a triumphantly received *Te Deum* and *Jubilate* to celebrate the Treaty of Utrecht, which ended the War of the Spanish Succession.

Life and works

NATIONALITY: German

BORN: Halle, 1685;

DIED: London, 1759

SPECIALIST GENRES:

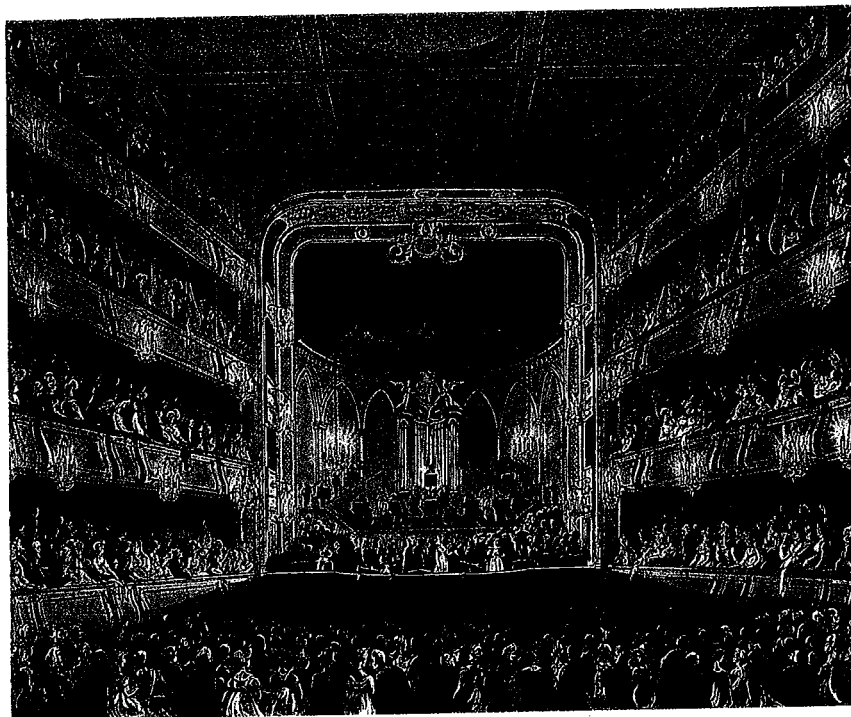
Italianate operas,
English oratorios.

MAJOR WORKS:

Water Music (1717);
Acis and Galatea (1718) and
45 other operas; *Chandos*
Anthems (1717–20);
12 *concerti grossi* (1739);
Messiah (1742); 15 other
oratorios; *Music for the*
Royal Fireworks (1749).

Life under a new king

Handel had absented himself from his duties in Hanover for two years when in 1714 he received a rude shock: Queen Anne died childless, and the English throne passed to his neglected former employer the Elector of Hanover, now George I of England. It is said that the famous *Water Music*, written to accompany the king's triumphal procession up the Thames, was composed as a peace-offering (although it was probably written three



ABOVE: Handel playing one of his organ concertos at the Covent Garden Theatre in London.

years after George's accession). In any case, Handel was quickly forgiven, and remained a favoured royal composer for the rest of his life. He also acquired a new patron, the Duke of Chandos, for whose magnificent estate in Edgware Handel wrote the 11 *Chandos Anthems*, a *Te Deum*, the masque *Acis and Galatea*, and his first attempt at an English oratorio, *Esther*.

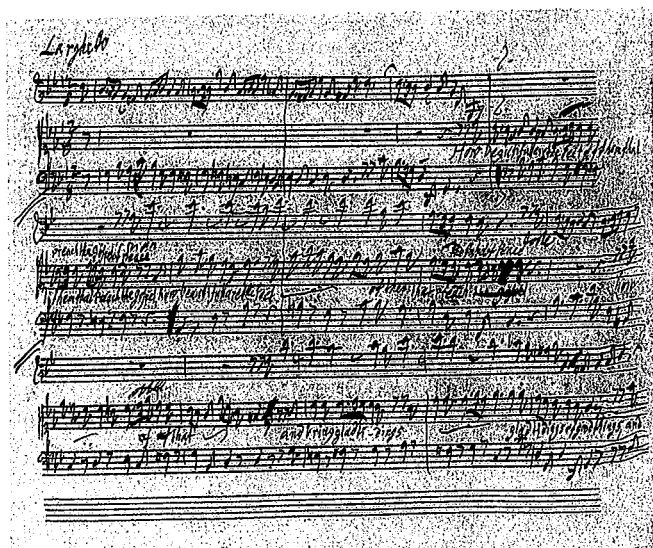
The Royal Academy

In 1719 the grandly named Royal Academy of Music came into being. This institution, supported by a group of 62 royal and noble subscribers, aimed to establish a regular opera company in London, with Handel as its composer-in-residence. Over the next eight years he supplied some 14 Italian operas for the company, including

Radamisto, *Rodelinda*, *Admeto*, *Giulio Cesare* and *Tamerlano*, and engaged some of the finest European singers to perform them. These included the great castrato Senesino, a man possessed of a "powerful, clear, equal and sweet contralto voice", and the sopranos Francesca Cuzzoni and Faustina Bordoni, all engaged at astronomical salaries. Apart from the entertainment of the operas themselves, London society was soon treated to the diverting spectacle of the two rival divas fighting on stage while Senesino spent his time sulking in the background.

Change to oratorio

George I died in 1727. For his successor, George II's, coronation Handel provided four anthems (including *Zadok the Priest*, which has been sung at British coronations ever since). By this time the Academy was in deep financial trouble, and Handel's own financial losses – combined with waning public enthusiasm for this "exotic and irrational entertainment", the unexpected popularity of John Gay's satirical *Beggar's Opera* in 1728, and a complete breakdown in health – prompted a change of direction. He was already



LEFT: The aria "How beautiful are the feet" from Handel's autograph score of *Messiah*.

RIGHT: Handel's choir singing an oratorio by Willem de Fesch, as drawn by Hogarth in 1731.



writing instrumental music, especially organ concertos, for the London pleasure gardens, but although he continued to write Italian operas, including *Amadante* and *Serse*, until 1740, he needed a new genre. He found it in the English oratorio, beginning with *Deborah*, *Athaliah*, *Saul* and *Israel in Egypt* in the 1730s, but reaching its apogee in *Messiah*, written for performance in Dublin in 1742.

In setting these Biblical stories, Handel adapted elements from Italian opera, particularly the recitative-aria format; but reduced the soloists' importance in order to give more prominence to the chorus and orchestra. This clever ploy ensured the survival of his oratorios as a mainstay of the repertoire of British choral societies. *Messiah* was followed by some 15 further oratorios, including *Samson* (1741–2), *Semele* (1743), which is more of an opera than an oratorio, *Judas Maccabaeus* (1746), *Alexander Balus* and *Joshua* (1747), *Solomon* (1748) and *Jephtha* (1751), all of which are still regularly performed.



ABOVE: Handel's memorial in Westminster Abbey, London.

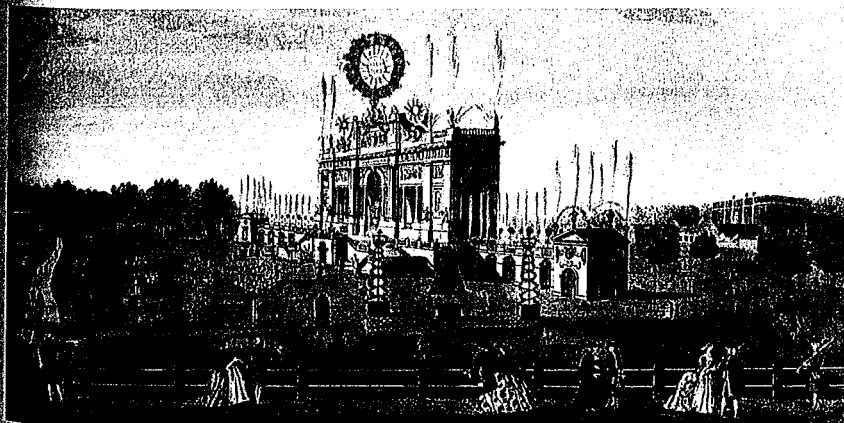
Last years

Handel's fortunes were mixed in the last years of his life. He had amassed considerable wealth despite his losses, and used some of it to support philanthropic causes, such as the Foundling Hospital. In April 1749 he fulfilled his last royal commission:

music to accompany a grand firework display in London's Green Park to mark the Peace of Aix-la-Chapelle – an occasion marred when the firework pavilion burnt to the ground. But Handel's *Music for the Royal Fireworks* ranks with the *Water Music* among his most popular instrumental compositions.

Two years later his sight was failing. A painful operation to cure cataracts proved useless, and for the last seven years of his life he was totally blind. But the people of his adopted land had taken him to their hearts, and while Bach's death went largely unremarked, Handel was buried with full honours in Westminster Abbey. His epitaph summed up his extraordinary achievement:

*The most Excellent Musician
any Age ever produced;
Whose Compositions were
a Sentimental Language
rather than mere Sounds;
And surpassed the Power of Words
In Expressing the various Passions
of the Human Heart.*



ABOVE: A contemporary artist's view of the structure erected in Green Park for the 1749 firework display celebrating the Peace of Aix-la-Chapelle.



ABOVE: The Handel Centenary Commemoration concert (1785) in Westminster Abbey.

George Frederick Handel

Encyclopedia of World Biography, December 12, 1998 Updated: October 22, 2012

Born: February 23, 1685 in Halle, Germany

Died: April 14, 1759 in London, United Kingdom

Nationality: German

Occupation: Composer

The dramatic English oratorios of the German-born English composer and organist George Frederick Handel (1685-1759) climaxed the entire baroque oratorio tradition. His Italian operas show a nobility of style and profundity of dramatic insight.

For half a century Handel was England's first composer. His lifelong ambition was to excel in creating Italian operas, and toward that end he developed a highly dramatic style of composition, which is to be found in all his works. Success eluded him during 30 years of Herculean labor to establish Italian opera in England until at last he turned to the creation of English oratorios, sacred and secular, which soon caught on in his adopted land and typify the English high baroque style.

George Frederick Handel (German, Georg Friedrich Händel) was born on February 23, 1685, to Georg and Dorothea Händel in Halle. To study music, he had to overcome his father's objections, at the same time yielding to insistence that he study law. But even before Handel had finished his course at the University of Halle in 1703, he had diligently pursued a musical career. About the age of seven, he performed at the keyboard before the duke and his court at Weissenfels and as a result became the pupil of Friedrich Wilhelm Zacchow, a composer and the organist at the Liebfrauenkirche in Halle. Zacchow taught him composition as well as organ, violin, and oboe, and by 1695 Handel was composing for these and other instruments. From 1696 until 1701, when he met the composer Georg Philipp Telemann, Handel composed voluminously. By his own testimony he "wrote like the very devil" in those days; the church cantatas and all but a few chamber works he composed at the time have disappeared.

Contact with Telemann and a meeting shortly afterward with the composer Agostino Steffani spurred Handel's operatic ambitions. In 1703 he resigned his post as organist at the Halle Domkirche and left the university, moving to Hamburg, where he joined the company of Rheinhard Keiser at the Goosemarket Theater as a violinist. Handel's exceptional skill at the keyboard soon brought him employment in that capacity in the performance of operas.

First Operas

Handel began his own operatic career with *Almira* (1704), which ran for some 20 performances at the Goosemarket Theater--a very successful run for those days. *Nero* followed in 1705, then *Florindo and Daphne*, which owing to its extraordinary length had to be produced as two separate works. (The scores for *Nero* and *Florindo and Daphne* are lost.)

Dismayed by Keiser's ineptitude and seeking richer operatic experience, Handel left for Italy in 1706. He visited Florence, Venice, Rome, and Naples during the next three seasons, meeting almost all the notable Italian musicians. His Italian journey resulted in two fine operas, *Rodrigo* (1707) and *Agrippina* (1709), produced in Florence and Venice, respectively; several dramatic chamber works, including two of the

finest he ever wrote, *Apollo e Daphne* and *Aci, Galatea e Polifemo*; and equally dramatic sacred compositions, notably *La Resurrezione* and the grand motets *Dixit Dominus*, *Laudate Pueri*, and *Nisi Dominus*.

During a second visit to Venice in the season of 1709-1710 Handel met several persons interested in England who no doubt influenced his decision to try his luck as a free-lance musician in London. However, he did not travel directly to England but stopped off at Hanover, where he accepted an offer made by the elector Georg Ludwig to be musical director of his court but requested leave almost immediately for his projected journey to England. A meeting with the manager of the King's Theatre furnished Handel with a chance to compose an opera; within two weeks he produced the opera *Rinaldo*, which marked the high point of the London season in 1710-1711. For better, as well as for worse, Handel's course was set for the rest of his life.

Settling in England

After a token visit to Hanover the following summer Handel returned to London, which became his permanent home. Between 1712 and 1715, he produced in rapid succession *Il pastor fido*, *Teseo*, *Silla*, and *Amadigi*. During this period he also composed a large amount of music for harpsichord, chamber ensembles, and orchestra, as well as various works for royal occasions, including the *Utrecht Te Deum and Jubilate* and the *Birthday Ode for Queen Anne*, both in 1713. These two so impressed the Queen that she awarded Handel an annual salary of £200.

Between 1715 and 1719, Handel produced several of his most famous works for orchestra and for smaller vocal ensembles. Queen Anne, who died in 1714, was succeeded by Georg Ludwig, Handel's former employer at Hanover, who now became George I, King of England. In 1715 Handel provided music for a royal pleasure cruise on the Thames for the King, his mistresses, and several barge-loads of courtiers--the famous *Water Music*.

In 1716 Handel accompanied his new monarch to Hamburg, while there composing the *St. John Passion* oratorio (based on a libretto by Berthold Heinrich Brockes), which, again, he finished within an incredibly short period. In 1717 he became musical director for the Earl of Carnarvon (later the Duke of Chandos) at his palatial home, Cannons, where Handel composed the famous *Chandos Anthems*, wrote music for John Gay's *Acis and Galatea* and Alexander Pope's *Haman and Mordecai*, and composed a great quantity of instrumental music.

Operas for the Royal Academy

In 1719 Handel accepted an invitation to join forces with Giovanni Bononcini and Attilio Ariosti in the activities of the newly founded Royal Academy of Music. After traveling to Germany in search of singers, Handel wrote *Radamisto* for the academy's first season. In 1721 he collaborated in the composition of a composite opera, *Muzio Scaevola*: Bononcini composed the first act; Filippo Mattei, the second; and Handel, the third, which won the day.

Handel's operas *Floridante*, *Ottone*, and *Flavio* marked the third, fourth, and fifth seasons of the Royal Academy; despite their success the academy did not prosper. In 1724, to make up for the disastrous failure of Ariosti's opera *Vespasiano*, Handel very speedily brought *Giulio Cesare* to the boards, which had a resounding success. Bononcini was dismissed shortly before the production of Handel's *Tamerlano* in

1724, and Ariosti found himself without an engagement in 1725, the year for which Handel produced *Rodelinda*, another of his most successful operas.

In 1726 Handel became a naturalized Englishman and was appointed composer of music to the Chapel Royal. The season of 1727 saw the production of Handel's *Alessandro*, which marked the beginning of an intense rivalry between Faustina Bordoni and Francesca Cuzzoni, two prima donnas whose enmity greatly harmed the cause of Italian opera in London. Trouble between the two grew apace in the seventh season of the Royal Academy, during which Handel's *Admeto* and *Riccardo I* were performed, and at last erupted into violence during the production of Bononcini's *Astianatte*, when the ladies actually engaged in fisticuffs on stage, much to the delight of Joseph Addison, who described the event in the *Spectator*, and of John Gay, who inserted a parallel scene in his *Beggar's Opera*. Other factors no doubt lent weight to the growing public disenchantment, but this single event seemed to crystallize native opposition to Italian opera in London and introduced a succession of developments that led to its fall. The denouement came with the unprecedented success of the *Beggar's Opera* (1728). Despite Handel's best efforts with *Siroe* and *Tolomeo*, the first Royal Academy of Music failed.

Apparently undismayed, Handel immediately formed the New Royal Academy of Music in partnership with the Swiss entrepreneur Johann Jakob Heidegger. After a whirlwind trip to the Continent to audition new singers and to visit his mother, blind and alone at Halle, Handel returned to London in time to open the new season with *Lotario*, following this in a few weeks with *Partenope*. Thereafter his operas flowed forth on the average of two per year. The quality of all these operas notwithstanding--the list includes such masterworks as *Sosarme* (1732), *Orlando* (1733), *Arianna* (1734), and *Alcina* (1735)--Italian opera grew ever less popular in London. In April 1737 Handel suffered a stroke; he took a quick cure during the summer at Aix-la-Chapelle and returned to London in time to start the next season. Finally, with the miserable failure of *Imeneo* (1740) and *Deidamia* (1741), he at last gave up and wrote no more new operas.

The Oratorios

Handel's ultimate failure with operas was offset, however, by ever-increasing success with his oratorios. These provided a new vehicle, the possibilities of which he had begun to explore and experiment with nearly a decade earlier. Indeed these, along with related forms such as masques, odes, and royal occasional music, soon established a new vogue, in which Handel fared better with London audiences than he had ever done with Italian opera. As if to test a possible market for dramatic compositions in English, Handel revived *Acis and Galatea* without choruses in a performance at Lincoln's-Inn-Fields Theatre in 1731. Prospects for such nonoperatic performances must have seemed favorable, for the very next season Thomas Arne pirated a production of *Acis and Galatea* for his own profit, with choruses. Thereupon Handel immediately mounted yet another production at the King's Theatre, going his competitors one better by adding various numbers from *Aci, Galatea e Polifemo*, a work written during his Italian travels, which otherwise had little or nothing in common with the English masque.

Esther, which derived from another composition finished during Handel's stay at Cannons, was produced three times in 1732; its success indicated that producing oratorios was a profitable business. As a direct consequence, the oratorio became a regular feature of each season, with Handel leading the field, as previously he had done with Italian opera.

Deborah graced the fourth season of the New Royal Academy of Music for London audiences in 1733, and in mid-1733, Handel produced *Athalia* for Oxford. Both oratorios were very successful, and it was obvious that the new form was on its way to becoming an established feature of English concert life. During the Lenten season in 1735, Handel gave no less than 14 concerts, consisting mainly of oratorios. His music set to John Dryden's *Alexander's Feast* (1736) was successful, which perhaps explains why he not only revived several oratorios, including *Esther* and *Deborah*, but mounted as well a new version of *Il trionfo del tempo*, composed in Italy 29 years earlier.

In 1737, after Handel returned from the cure at Aix-la-Chapelle miraculously restored, he set to work on the eloquent *Funeral Anthem for the Death of Queen Caroline*; again the performance was very successful. *Saul* and *Israel in Egypt* followed in quick succession, the latter being an impressive choral triptych for the first part of which Handel revised the text of the *Funeral Anthem*. In 1739 Handel prepared his *Ode to St. Cecilia*. For his next work in this genre, he turned to Milton's *L'Allegro ed il pensieroso*, undoubtedly the finest poem he ever set to music; the performance at Lincoln's-Inn-Fields in 1740 again was an outstanding success.

In the season of 1740-1741, in which his opera *Deidamia* failed, Handel produced the oratorios *L'Allegro* and his best-known work, *Messiah*, in Dublin, along with a great many other works. On his return to London, he supervised a production of *Saul*, as well as other music, including *Hymen*, a masque revised from his opera *Imeneo*. The following season (1743-1744) saw three new works: the *Dettingen Te Deum*, *Semele*, and *Joseph*; and each succeeding season, a new pair: *Hercules* and *Belshazzar* (1744-1745); the *Occasional Oratorio* and *Judas Maccabeus* (1745-1746); *Alexander Balus* and *Joshua* (1747-1748); *Susanna* and *Solomon* (1748-1749); *Theodora* and the grand anthem for the Peace of Aix-la-Chapelle, for which celebration Handel also wrote the *Royal Fireworks* music (1749-1750). After he composed *The Choice of Hercules* (1750-1751) and *Jephtha* (1751), total blindness set in. Thenceforward he was limited to revising earlier works with the aid of the two John Christopher Smiths, father and son, and to improvising on organ and harpsichord in public performances. Handel's accomplishment during the last creative decade of his life seems almost miraculous when to these 20 major works are added the Italian cantatas, several concertos and concerti grossi, and other miscellaneous works. He died in London on April 14, 1759.

Working Habits

Surveying Handel's entire creative life, one gains a sense of spontaneous and incredibly abundant creative flow. This sense is confirmed by the marvelous collections of autographs preserved at the Fitzwilliam and British museums in England, which reveal not only the enormous bulk of his creative achievement but also something of his uncompromising critical judgment. There is scarcely a page without deletions and emendations; frequently, he struck out whole passages. He obviously knew the art of heavy pruning, and his works profited greatly from it.

Handel's propensity to "write like the very devil" proved invaluable, in view of the demands imposed upon his time and energies in opera composition throughout most of his career. Time after time, he found it necessary to meet crises without much time for creative gestation.

When Handel first arrived in London, for instance, it was urgent that he produce an opera quickly. By borrowing from *Rodrigo* and other works, he had the complete score ready within two weeks. Throughout

his operatic career, he achieved similar feats. When he turned to oratorio composition, the situation did not change greatly. To "save" the season of 1738-1739, Handel created both *Israel in Egypt* and *Saul* within an incredibly short period; no less than 17 of the 35 numbers of *Israel in Egypt* are derived from earlier pieces. The *Messiah* was written between August 22 and September 12, 1741. Again he depended heavily upon earlier works, mainly the *Italian Duets* composed earlier that summer. But in this instance, as in almost all others, the product bears the stamp of original, coherent unity so convincingly as to belie borrowing.

This paradoxical aspect of Handel's genius has received a great deal of scholarly attention. But all apologetics and moralizing indictments aside, it is clearly evident that Handel was at heart a dramatic composer for whom setting the scene and atmosphere and delineating character thrust all other considerations into the background.

Further Readings

- The best-balanced study in the vast literature on Handel's life and works is Paul Henry Lang, *George Frideric Handel* (1966), which shows remarkable insight into the man, his works, and his times. Gerald Abraham, *Handel; A Symposium* (1954), is a very useful collection of essays on various aspects of Handel's creative life and an indispensable handbook for the Handel student. Three works established important milestones in Handel research and scholarship: Otto E. Deutsch, *Handel: A Documentary Biography* (1955); Jens Peter Larsen, *Handel's Messiah: Origins, Composition, Sources* (1957); and Winton Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorio and Masques* (1959).

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